

Beyond the Edge by twowritehands

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Summary:

Strangers since highschool, Joyce and Hopper trust each other enough to step beyond the edge of the world side by side. And afterwards, they have a chance to bring their two lives together to build on that trust.

Beyond the Edge

Author's Note:

Totally missed David Harbour's tidbit that they dated in highschool, so this is technically AU

Jim Hopper was on the fringes of Joyce's life for as long as she could remember. Kindergarten sandboxes, third grade dodgeball tournaments, the same remedial math class in the fifth grade, the same bus in middle school (after his parents split and he and his mom moved into a trailer a few down from her own), then in high school their lockers were side by side; that never made them friends.

In all honesty, Jim Hopper was just a name with a face in a town where all faces had names. He was just another dumb boy who became one of the tallest and loudest boys who then became mister funny guy, the kind that acted like he was skating by on pure charm and athletics but who actually passed his own tests without cheating. Not the quarterback. Not the prom king. About four or five down in the popular crowd totem pole, actually. He didn't set the rules of the jungle, but he did follow them.

None of it ever meant much to Joyce, who kept her head down and stayed with her own kind--the kids who learned to smoke early because, unlike Hopper and his friends, their parents couldn't afford band instruments or football uniforms, but could always, always, *always* afford a pack of cigarettes.

The locker thing was when Joyce really noticed Hopper, though. Because even small, angry teenage girls notice the boys who notice them. It wasn't a crush or anything. She just. You know. Noticed.

For about two minutes every morning and sometimes between classes, his world and hers slid right past one another. He came near enough to her to say, in a deep timbre--one of the deepest in school, in fact, "Heeeyyyy, Joyce B!"

Joyce B. She got that a lot because ever since preschool there was another Joyce from which her classmates and teachers needed to

distinguish her. The other Joyce was in Hopper's crowd, perky and blonde and involved in just about every club. Joyce Staton, who got to be called just Joyce. There was beautiful, lovable Joyce, and then there was short and scrappy Joyce B. The B was for Bramble, but they just said Joyce B.

Like choice B.

Not as good as Joyce A, Joyce B. The failsafe Joyce, a backup for in case the good Joyce didn't show.

"Heeeyyy, Joyce B!" Hopper would greet. His mouth would spread wide in a smile as his eyes squinted. It seemed sincere, like they were old friends. He just thought it was charming to act like side by side lockers for four years made a kind of kinship. She wasn't a fool.

"Grass Hopper," she would greet back with an acidic smile. He always laughed. She never meant for it to be funny. She kept saying it, though.

It definitely *was not* a crush. If anything, it was a curse. If *anything* , he was her *enemy* .

Joyce was often late to class-- smoking behind the gym required her to really book it, a long run made only the more difficult by her short legs--and it never *ever* helped that when she needed to get inside her locker Chrissy freaking Carpenter was inevitably leaning on it and giggling while she let Jim Hopper feel her up.

In those days, Joyce hadn't found her voice just yet. As a grown woman she would make fists down at her sides, puff up and in a strong clear voice make them move. As a teenaged girl, it was easier to simply inch closer until they sensed her and scooted out of her way.

Hopper never greeted her in his charming way whenever their worlds collided like this--he was far too busy colliding with Chrissy Carpenter--and *that* was how Joyce knew his "sincere" greetings were more of a show than anything. He didn't *actually* care.

For most of senior year, Joyce never even bothered with her locker;

Chrissy Carpenter could have it. Joyce just used Lonnie's instead. Looking back she can almost swear that she never even really *liked* Lonnie. He was just... the one that she caught.

He was her kind of people, not totally bad looking, and he was the first one to ask her out. Her first kiss, her first sex... He was sweet to her. And because he had a car and his mom didn't mind when she slept over, he was a convenient escape from her own crappy parents.

Then the summer after graduation, he was the baby's daddy, and it was still the sixties when daddy married mommy, end of story. The only thing she ever felt on her wedding day was morning sickness and humiliation.

Joyce Byers. She should have known keeping the B would only end in disaster.

Five years later, a second son didn't fix a damn thing. Lonnie blew their money on booze or cars or sports bets with the guys. He made promises to Jonathan that he couldn't or wouldn't keep. He never listened. She hated his friends and would refuse to see them or let them come in the house. If she nagged him, or confronted him, Lonnie would tell her she needed to go on meds. He saw her attempt at decency and *respect* as "acting out" or "panicking" and wrote it all off as nothing but an anxiety disorder.

Jonathan was five and Will was barely a year old when Joyce picked up a second job. She still worked the day shift at the general store, but in those days she had a great babysitter. The woman was her co-worker, a sweet older woman already retired from nursing who worked only part time to save up for extravagant Christmas presents for the granddaughter on the way. Samantha Hopper, Jim's mom.

Hopper had gone away for college and then settled in the city. It was only through his mother that Joyce got any updates. He was accepted into the police academy. He was getting married. He graduated. He was a big city cop now solving homicide just like on tv. They were getting a house. They were expecting a baby.

Joyce learned these tidbits throughout the years with a distant kind of longing. He did it. He got out of Hawkins. And by his mother's

account he was doing what all children were promised they could--he was reaching his full potential.

Samantha liked Joyce and was happy to babysit for her at a low rate, especially if it meant Joyce could save enough to divorce Lonnie, whom Samantha despised. Joyce toyed with the idea but really the extra money was to go in a college fund for Jonathan who was just a baby but already talking about going to college at NYU.

As the years rolled by, Lonnie began to drink more and when drunk he was confrontational. He started getting arrested. Joyce refused to put Jonathan's college fund up for bail, so Lonnie always had to sit in jail until his trial. This was Hawkins, though, so trials always happened within the week. It still pissed Lonnie off to no end. At first, they would spend days fighting about it and these fights were loud and often destructive to property.

Eventually, Lonnie would get out of jail and not even come home. She knew he had girlfriends. In fact, one of the times he was arrested was because the blow job he had been getting on the side of the road was from a seventeen year old.

She lost the second job when Will was five, because she lost her baby sitter. Samantha Hopper moved very suddenly away from Hawkins, stating that her family needed her near to help with Sara, her grandchild.

After that, it was so much easier when Lonnie was in jail that Joyce looked forward to it. She even began hoping he would do something to land himself in actual prison for about twenty years. Realizing these fantasies helped her come to terms with the fact that she *had* to get a divorce.

He didn't even fight her. By then everything was in her name already--she'd taken him off the house, the car, all the bank accounts, one by one through the years so that he couldn't pawn titles for cash or write big checks.

He packed his stuff and left Hawkins. Ten year old Jonathan snapped a picture of the tail lights. Joyce worked as much as she could, leaving Will with Jonathan to save on baby sitters.

When her back ached and her feet throbbed she did overtime with nothing but her boys in mind. She worked late and got up early. She came in day after day, week after week, month after month and year after year to the same stupid walls and stupid shelves and stupid cash register. She smiled for customers and made small talk.

Then suddenly Jim Hopper came back to town. Rumor was, his wife had left him and he had gotten himself fired from the big city police department for being drunk on the job. It stopped Joyce in her tracks when she heard this. Jim Hopper? A fall down drunk?

The higher you fly the further you fall.

Unsurprisingly, Hawkins Police Department was willing to overlook his misdeeds in the past--the mayor was starry eyed for his city experience and, rumor had it, satisfied with a doctor's note excusing some of the outrageous things he'd done to get fired--and so just like that, they made him their Chief of Police. Freaking Hawkins, man.

Joyce didn't know, at first, what had really happened. She assumed Sara--who she calculated to be about Will's age--was with her mother in the city. It's what he told people. Why shouldn't they believe it?

She saw him for the first time in twelve years when he pulled her over for speeding. She was usually a cautious enough driver but that day she had an emergency of sorts. All sense of urgency temporarily fled from her, though, when she got a look at the cop that approached her window.

Jim Hopper. He wore the uniform well, though he was packing more weight in the gut than she expected. (Every single man in Hawkins had a beer gut, she didn't know *why* she thought Hopper would be an exception. Especially with his reputation.)

"Joyce," he said when he recognized her. He was smiling but the sobriety alarmed her. Where was the cocky, swaggering teenager that would flirt so freely?

"Hop," she returned. She'd never called him that before. But as he hadn't called her "Joyce B", she couldn't call him "Grass Hopper". And *Jim* was just too personal. So he became Hop.

He stood with a hip cocked out, thumbs in his belt. His hat and his gun, his beard and his posture, it was all so cliché it was sickening, "Know how fast you were going?" he asked her.

"Well no I don't, Hop," she snapped as her sense of urgency returned with a large helping of annoyance, "I know I was driving fast as hell, because my son is in the nurse's office at Hawkins Primary School puking his guts out!"

His smile was slow and it almost made his eyes shine, "Gotta kid?"

"Two of them," she said through her teeth, "Will's my youngest. He's seven."

At this she might as well have punched him. His good humored expression fell and he stepped back, turned on the spot as if looking around for authority figures and then ducked back down, "Look, just lemme have a quick peek at your license and registration and I'll send you on your way with a warning, okay?"

Confused, Joyce pulled the cards from her wallet and passed them over. His eyes scanned over them and he huffed, "Byers?" He read with outrage. "Christ, you *married* that punk?"

"Divorced," she bit angrily. He passed the cards back over,

"Look I just have a job to do like everyone else," he said, "But I know your job now is to get to your boy. Take care of him." He patted her door and stepped away so that she could drive off.

She did so, frowning. *What the hell ?*

From there he was around town like everyone else. At the bank. Tooting his horn at her from the intersection as she crossed in front of his Jeep. In the store, buying beer, loaf bread, and cigarettes every Saturday.

"Jesus don't you live off anything else, Hop?" she asked once as she rang him up. She had predicted the entire order the moment he stepped in.

"Just sweet lovin' and caffeine," he returned. "But I can usually get

those for free.” He winked.

She snorted, shaking her head. Rumors had him sleeping with any woman that would have him.

“How’s the sick kid?” he grunted. It took her a moment to catch-up. It had been months since the almost ticket.

“Fine,” she returned. “Not sick anymore.”

He gave a curt nod and left with his things. The woman in line behind him, Mary Drake, stepped up with a tragic sigh, “That poor, poor man.”

“Excuse me?” Joyce asked. She knew that his bright city life tanking and burning was a tragedy but only in so far as a man did something stupid to ruin his life. But something in Mary’s eyes said Hop was a victim of more than stupidity.

“Don't you know?” Mary asked her. Joyce leaned in, wide eyed,

“No. What?”

“His daughter. Sara? She died last June. Cancer.” Joyce choked and her eyes burned and sprang with tears.

“She’d been fighting it since she was five,” Mary continued. “It’s why Samantha moved in with them, you know to help nurse her. Oh, that little girl in so much pain for so long and then gone... It just breaks your heart.”

Joyce literally couldn't even entertain the idea of either one of her boys having terminal cancer. Her mind flinched from the images like they were fire.

“But he’s been telling everyone that she's in the city with her mother!” Joyce objected.

“Well,” Mary shrugged, “Her grave is. Look, the only place in the world he had left to go was his hometown where everyone knows him. If you could avoid telling thirty people a day that your baby is dead, wouldn't you?”

Joyce covered her mouth, remembering when she first saw him after his return. *You're job is to get to your boy. Take care of him.*

For the rest of the day, Joyce felt terribly. She had been assuming the worst. Thought he had a great life that he just pissed away on booze and wild behavior. She thought he was another ex husband paying child support. Some big city loser who came back to the small town where he could be a big fish.

And, the worst of it? That was the man he *wanted* people to think he was.

More years passed. Jonathan surpassed Joyce in height and started working after school to help make ends meet--he did so against Joyce's wishes, but he was a good boy with a big heart. He just wanted to help.

Then out of nowhere, Joyce's nightmare came true. Will was gone. They were saying he was dead. She felt like she was losing her mind but she *knew* she wasn't and--Hopper was there. He was on her team. He *believed* her.

It was them against the world. And in that awful other place, he walked side by side with her through that murky hell, and he got her baby back to her.

The story broke that Hawkins lab had kidnapped her boy and faked his death but nothing was ever said about a monster or a portal to an extra dimension pulsing like a putrid heart in the center of their town. Nothing was said about a girl child that could do unfathomable things with her mind.

Hopper filed the report in a way that rang up the damages to her home as part of the investigation. The town of Hawkins paid for the repairs. To save taxpayer money, Hopper did all the labor himself and for free. He fixed the wall hole, replaced the burned hallway paneling, the singed and bloody carpet, and rehung the wallpaper.

Joyce cooked him dinner--more accurately, Jonathan cooked him dinner--whenever he was over for these repairs. Often enough Joyce came home to find the man setting her kitchen table and joshing with

her boys. Will had gotten Hopper to read *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* and they had a lot to say to one another on the topic of the Great Eagles and whether or not they could have made the quest much shorter.

“Joyce!” Hop always greeted when she came through the door. “Have fun at work?”

“Oxymoronic question,” Will would chirp.

“It wasn't anything special,” she would answer with a kiss to Will's head and another to Jonathan's cheek.

“Prickly!” she declared one evening, days before Thanksgiving, noting for the first time that her son had a beard coming in.

“He's growing his beard out,” Will explained for his bashful big brother.

“Because beards are *manly*, right?” Hopper asked loudly and proudly, puffing his chest out and lifting his chin as he patted his own hairy face. To Joyce he said, “I bet *one steak dinner* that pretty boy Steve Harrington can't grow one.”

Joyce frowned with intrigue. “Does Nancy Wheeler even *like* beards?” she asked her son teasingly, getting right to the heart of the matter.

“I don't know,” Jonathan admitted with a blush and duck of his head.

Hopper cut in, “Hey, Jon, trust me. Girls that age don't know *what* they like until someone comes along and gives it to them the right way, okay? Grow the beard, kiss the ever living hell out of her like she's a goddess of water and you're dying of thirst--” at this Joyce lost her breath and crossed her legs as Hop continued, thumping the table, “And then she'll *dump* baby smooth Stevie, and *date* you, and for the *rest* of her life she'll tell all her friends that *real men* have beards.”

“Hop!” Joyce cried, laughing freely. He looked at her with this expression that was purely angelic in innocence.

“What?”

Honestly she didn't have an answer. There was nothing at all wrong with anything he said. In fact, that was why she was so... shocked. He was advising her sons in matters that she wouldn't have thought to address. He was being a role model. A good one. Her heart fluttered.

By Christmas she was in love with him, but she wouldn't let herself face it. Jonathan invited him for Christmas dinner right in front of her. She was on her way in from work, the boys were on their way out the door, and Hopper was cleaning up tools and water droplets from under the kitchen sink where he had just finished fixing a leaky pipe.

Jonathan tossed the invite over his shoulder like a second thought, "You should be here for our Christmas dinner!" And then with a wide smile he was gone.

Joyce wanted so badly for Hopper to agree that her heart broke when the man sighed into the suddenly awkward, quiet living room and said, "Well my mother is still in the city and... well, the grave is there. Diane and me, we made plans to---"

"Oh, god! Of course! I'm sorry--" Joyce babbled. Her mind filled with images of his ex wife, the mother of his child, greeting him in the cemetery with a kiss. They obviously still loved one another. Grief had been the only thing to pull them apart. Maybe now, with some years to coat the pain, maybe they were falling in love all over again. Joyce wanted to crawl in a hole somewhere.

"Hey, no, no," he was saying, "It's just a little thing we agreed we would do. Never let her be alone on Christmas out in the cold." His voice wobbled and broke. He cleared his throat.

Joyce took his hand and squeezed it, "Wherever Sara is, Hop?" she put her other hand on her heart, "I'm sure it's warm."

All at once his arms went around her. He was a large man by usual standards so her small thin stature made him something of a giant. He scooped her up and held her against his chest. His thick arms

seemed able to wrap around her twice as much as any other pair of arms to ever encircle her. He smelled like cigarette smoke and laundry detergent. Her heels left the carpet, "Thank you," he said somewhat gruffly in her ear.

He put her back down on her jelly like legs. He looked embarrassed, "Uh, well your sink shouldn't drip anymore."

"What? A dripping faucet?" she scoffed and laughed, "Hopper, you didn't have to come out to fix something like that!"

"I noticed it before..." he shrugged, "I wanted to help. Jonathan said it would be okay."

Joyce drew a deep even breath, "Yeah, well. Jonathan likes having you around. Will, too. I guess they feel safer."

He looked at her, long and hard and at length said, "Look, Joyce. I like being around but if you would rather I stay away--"

"What? No! I--I don't. No! I like having you here, too."

His eyebrows went up even as his eyes squinted, "Yeah?"

She blushed. "You're the Byers family hero," she gushed a little.

At this, he frowned and shifted his weight, "That's stupid. *You're* the hero."

She scoffed, but he closed the distance between them, " *You* never gave up. *I* knelt right here and told you to let him go. Did you? No. Not for a damn second. *You're* the Byers family hero, Joyce."

"But you believed me," she countered, tears hanging in her eyes, "They could have locked me up, but you listened to me and you took a chance--" she cut off when her voice broke and failed her. Their eyes had met.

To get Will back they had stepped beyond the very edge of the world together and now they did so again, but in a very different way. His blue eyes looked right into her. He dipped his head down as his hands came up, cupping either side of her face. Their whole mouths

met.

She caught the front of his shirt in her fists and went to her tippy toes, sighing and melding more into the kiss. He scooped her up again, this time both her feet left the carpet entirely. His beard scratched pleasantly against her face. She let go of his shirt, touched his jaw, the heat on the back of his neck, his hair. He grunted and moaned a little into the kiss, sending shock waves through her whole body.

He wanted this as badly as she did.

The kiss went deeper and harder until they had to break for breath but they didn't stop. Panting, breathing in each other's hot breaths, they never pulled too far away. They kissed and kissed and her legs went around his waist so that he was holding her up there in the middle of the room, his wide palms flat on her ass, fingers mashing into the meat of her cheeks.

Her lips were getting raw from the beard but she didn't mind. A kiss broke with a smile on both their lips, "Christ, Joyce," he panted.

"More," she whispered.

"God, yes," he agreed. She slid down his body--feeling the bulge in his pants--until she was on her feet again. Their mouths smacked apart. She laced her fingers through his, saying only,

"Bedroom."

Hop shut her bedroom door behind them and caught her at the side of the bed by the hips, his body pressing fully against hers from behind. His fingers brushed the hair back from her neck and his mouth pressed there tenderly. Joyce's heart pounded and her body rang with desire.

She let him pull her clothes from her body, his big rough hands pushing her shirt up and her pants down, dragging over her untouched skin deliciously.

She got in the bed totally naked and lay back on the pillows as he wrestled out of his own clothes with this dark predatory look in his

eyes under his heavy brow. It took only a few moments for him to join her but they stretched out for Joyce like decades of anticipation.

He had tattoos on his shoulders and when he stepped out of his underwear, his heavy cock swung down threateningly. She gulped at the sight of it. Obviously she was no stranger to an erection but somehow this one seemed angry. She was shaking when he crawled over her.

Their soft tummies pressed together. A million things raced through her mind, things more than her physical desire. Things that brought such joy that she could die under the weight of them. And what fear was in her was purely emotional. So far all she knew about love was that it let you down yet somehow she wanted it still. From him. Jim Hopper.

He kissed her, calloused hand scraping down her outer thigh as he settled between her legs. It progressed swiftly from there. A little prep with his thick fingers. Some beardy kisses to parts that Lonnie never bothered to kiss. Then he was pushing in, and she knew what she wanted so rather than lie back and wait for the whole thing to be over--as she had done with Lonnie too many times to count--she took as much as she got. She took it all for herself, cherishing it.

He didn't say much but what he did say assured her that he liked what she was doing so she took more. The orgasm swept over her very suddenly; a deep one that churned her muscles and shook her bodily head to toe. He pumped through it chanting, "Yeah. Sweetheart. Go!" as she arched her back and went over the edge, screaming out the pleasure that burned through her. When she came back down, he was still in her, still hot and hard and going.

Her overwrought body twinged with shocks as he continued to thrust inside her. It made her whole body go hot and her vision narrow, and he went and *went*. He wasn't anywhere near the end! She wasn't sure she could take it. Whimpering and shaking, all she could do was clutch his sweaty shoulders with her weakened hands.

He slowed, paused, thumb caressing her face so goddamn tenderly, "You okay, baby doll?" he asked with labored breath.

She whimpered again, “I-I,” she stammered. A part of her wanted to stop but this other part was already beginning to feel swirls of pleasure so much deeper and darker than before.

“Need to stop?” He panted.

“No,” she choked, and his name came out on a sob, as she clutched him desperately, “*Hop* !”

“I got you,” he whispered as he started moving again, “Joyce, *god* , I-” she could feel him shaking. She pressed her lips all over him, wherever she could reach. He worked in her, gasping and growling and gritting out her name.

It was beyond all endurance. Never in her life had sex held this kind of power. His torturous body took her first orgasm and turned it inside out to make a new one. The second tore out of her raw and so big it was painful. He came that time, hips speeding up and slamming his dick deeper inside her and then stopping.

Joyce felt utterly used up.

They fell apart. He crashed to the sheets beside her. Both their chests were heaving. They glistened with sweat. Joyce was floating in a state of stunned ecstasy. All her life the world told her sex was good. With Lonnie it had began decent enough--on teenaged standards--and when the quality deteriorated she had chalked it up to the exhaustion of parenthood. Women's erotic fiction was just that. Fiction.

But then, so were monsters crawling out of extra dimensions.

Hop chuckled and sighed, “Goddamn, that was good.”

She echoed his chuckle weakly. He went up on an elbow, looking down at her with this unfathomable look, “Can you talk yet?”

How did he *know* ? Was this just a standard fuck to him? Did he *always* ruin the women that crawled into bed with him? She lifted a hand to answer him with a silent, not yet.

The laugh that rolled out of him was purely self satisfied. He collapsed again on the sheets, “Never saw anyone go off so hard. I

thought you'd explode.”

She smiled, pleased that at least one thing she did was as new to him as his stamina was to her. She didn't want the best sex of her life to be, from his end, subpar.

He went on an elbow again, scooting closer. His fingers went through her hair, a soft smile on his lips, “So damn beautiful.”

She had to laugh. It was just too much, and the very face of her fear was suddenly stark in front of her so she voiced it, “Stop with the goddess of water routine. We both got what we wanted.”

He looked *stricken* , “Routine?”

“Come on, Hop,” she said behind the walls which she was building with record speed, “It's all about showing us clueless girls what to want so that you can get what *you* want. You've proven the play works through half the women in this town. That's all it is, right?”

His eyebrows were low and his mouth was open. His offense was palpable, “ *All it is ?* ”

Suddenly Joyce wasn't so sure. Hop gripped her hip, pressing her down into the bed and rolling half over her, “You think I'm using you?”

“Well, tomorrow is--you know--going to be hard for you and so you needed... you know--escape. I was an option.” She *really* needed a smoke.

“An option,” he repeated and she decided it was annoying as hell the way he took what she said and made it this awful, degrading echo. He pulled away--which hurt like a band aid ripping across her heart--and sat with his back to her on the edge of the bed, face in his hands.

Joyce sat up, and every muscle in her body felt different. She didn't know what to do or say. She just knew she was so far in love that he would shatter her if she didn't cushion the blow. A panicked part of her had decided that accepting his promiscuity and her role in it would somehow be better. A friend with benefits rather than an old notch on the belt, soon forgotten.

"Okay," he croaked, "If I'm just a broken man that needed comfort what are you? What was this to you?"

She gulped.

He turned and when he saw her sitting there totally naked with her knees drawn up, he blinked as if dazzled by a bright light, and what anger was in his face fell away. He turned more to face her, sliding in the sheets, and something in his expression told her he knew. He *knew* what she was trying to hide, "Sweetheart," he said, "What in the world did that rat bastard do to you that you don't even know love when it's been given to you?"

Her face crumpled and she hid it behind her arms and knees as the tears came hot from her eyes. She felt him come to her, crawl up behind her against the headboard and scoop her into his lap. She cried into his throat with his arms around her.

"You're not an option, Joyce. You're my purpose." He kissed her hair and her forehead and her tear tracks and murmured again and again, "I love you, I love you, I love you."

She fell asleep in his lap, held together in his arms. When she woke, it was night out and she was stretched out on the bed. He was on his side next to her, head cushioned on his arm, other arm extended to lightly run his fingers over the stretch marks on her puffy belly.

She put a hand on his to stop it. She didn't like attention being drawn to her stretch marks. He slid closer, caged her and tilted her head back for a soft lingering kiss. Before it broke, they were making love again. This time was softer and slower and when she broke the first time he went with her. It wasn't the explosion of before but it was charged enough that tears rolled from her eyes. He kissed them from her skin.

When they parted he combed her hair with his fingers for a bit and then he left the bed, returning quickly with a pack of smokes and a lighter. She said it then, what had been inside her for so long now, "I love you, Jim Hopper."

Grinning, he kissed the end of a bud before putting it between her

lips. Dropping beside her, he put one in his own mouth and lit hers first. With an ashtray on the pillow between them, they slumped against the headboard and puffed away in contented silence.

"When will the boys be back?" he asked, the smoke of a long draw swirling from his mouth and all around his head with the words.

"Any minute now," she said with a look at the clock. She had gone into action, stubbing out the smoke and rolling from the bed to gather her clothes. She wasn't in a particular hurry, just getting it done because her boys didn't knock. Mom's got nothing going on in her life that would require it.

Hopper got into his clothes too, but he didn't put the cigarette out so he was still puffing on it as they made their way down the hall to the kitchen.

"Should I... uuhh, go?" he asked.

"Do you want to go?" she asked.

"No, but the boys might not like that I'm here--in *this* capacity."

She snorted. "They understand sex, Hop," she said, passing him on the way to the coffee maker which had already been turned on--Jonathan was a saint sometimes. She went on her toes and pecked Hop on the lips. "And they like you. They won't care."

"I sure as hell cared when Mr. Bloomer was screwing my mom at night and being chatty with me over breakfast."

"Trust me, Hop. It'll be okay."

"Al-riiiight," he intoned past the bud, drawing out a kitchen chair and dropping in it, "Mama knows best." She placed a cup of coffee in front of him. "Hmm," he said, catching her by the hip, and sneaking a squeeze to her ass, "Caffeine and sweet lovin' are always free."

She snorted and whacked his hand away, "I think you only love me because I supply better food than beer and white bread."

"What?" he asked.

"You only ever buy beer and white bread and smokes, Hop!" she accused. "No wonder you think mine and Jonathan's cooking is so great."

He frowned at her, smoke rising from his nostrils like a confused old dragon, "What the hell are you talking about? The bread I buy at your store is for the ducks on the lake by my trailer."

Joyce blushed and covered her face and explained how she thought that was all he ever ate and they howled with laughter. That was how Jonathan and Will found them when they burst in the front door just before ten.

"Hopper, you're still here!" Will cried happily.

"Ye-up," he called on an exhale of smoke, tapping his ashes into an ashtray with his eyes on Joyce, "That cool with you guys?"

"Cool!" they chorused, already more involved in Will's Atari, which Joyce had broken down and allowed him to open early since he had already guessed what it was. Joyce gave Hop an I Told You So smirk, and he chuckled, leaning to peck her on the lips.

For the next hour, Will played Atari, Jonathan cheered him on while doing homework and listening to music. Hop stayed at the table, next to Joyce, with his hand on her thigh as they talked and didn't talk. They traded work schedules and held brief staring contests, discussed old rumors and just shared a bud.

When he wasn't looking deep into her eyes, he was watching the cigarette burn, listening to the boy's racket with a soft smile. Both home, both safe. She covered his hand with hers, and when he looked at her again she was reminded of his predatory bedroom eyes.

"Okay! Bed!" she said. It was after nine thirty. Will protested like always, "one more level, mom!"

"Nuh-uh," she said firmly. "We have a hard enough time getting you up in the morning as it is. Bed. Now." Jonathan turned off the game with a few soft words and a ruffle to his little brother's hair that made Will swat at him.

Jonathan turned off the record player and packed up his books, making sure Will had plenty of time to disappear down the hall. Alone he looked square at the cop. "Hey,"

Joyce and Hop traded a quick look. Maybe the teenager *did* have a problem after all. Joyce crossed her arms, tracing her bottom lip once. Her heart rate rocketed and her lungs tried to close.

Hop, contrastly, looked as calm as ever as he dashed out the cinders in the ashtray. "Yeah, Jon?"

The sixteen year old scrutinized them both with narrowed eyes. Then smiled sideways. "What do you want for breakfast in the morning?"

Joyce breathed easier with relief and touched her forehead. "Oh, Jonathan, don't--you don't have to--"

"He'll be here, right?" Jonathan cut in; he'd heard enough rumors about the chief to warrant the sharp edged question.

Hop stood from the chair and leaned on it until it creaked. His words were chosen carefully. "I haven't been okay the last few years, man. Took a lot of people for granted, but this time," he looked over at Joyce who floated closer, rubbed his back as he squeezed her shoulder. "I mean it, I'll be here. Okay?"

Jonathan smiled. "Okay. Eggs, then."